

# From At Risk to At Promise:

## Developing Scholar Identities Among Black Males

Gilman W. Whiting  
Vanderbilt University

Black males and females are consistently underrepresented in gifted programs. Just as unfortunate, countless reports and studies indicate that too many Black males are not succeeding in school settings. A scholar identity model, grounded in various achievement-based theories, is shared in this article as one solution to addressing the educational and social plight of Black male adolescents. In addition to presenting the model, suggestions for prevention and intervention are provided.

The school's ubiquitous message is that success and failure is a matter of personal choice. This discourse is expressed in the school rules and in the verbal exhortations of adults to kids: "Success is up to you." . . . However, the homily obscures both the material and social constraints that prevent African American children from succeeding. The way school is organized to promote dominant cultural values and expressive modes favors the middle-class White . . . students at the expense of the African American student . . .

—Ann Arnett Ferguson, *Bad Boys* (2000, p. 202)

**A**lthough much of America's educational community is discussing the No Child Left Behind Act, high stakes testing, and what these new versions of old ideas actually mean for the larger society, and although the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) 2005 report shows a marked increase in student enrollments in primarily public schools, Black<sup>1</sup> males con-

tinue spiraling further down the achievement ladder. In short, they are failing to thrive in many school settings. Young Black males rank highest among students who choose to leave school; are suspended, expelled, or kicked out of school; score poorly on tests; have low GPAs and high rates of referral and placement in special education; and are underrepresented in gifted education (e.g., NCES, 2005; Whiting, 2004). Although young Black males (elementary-school age) are included in these dismal data, the data hold most true for Black males in middle and high schools. That is, as Black males proceed through the educational pipeline, they appear to become less academically engaged (Ferguson, 2001). They appear to have learned to underachieve (e.g., Ford, 1996), to devalue school and academics (Ogbu, 2003, 2004), and to reject school as a place to develop their sense of identity, particularly self-worth and self-efficacy (Whiting, 2004). Instead, we see Black males thriving in the sports and entertainment industries—areas they view as pathways to guaranteed recognition, respect, and large sources of income (Platt, 2002; Sailes, 2003).

Educators, policymakers, and community leaders have developed a myriad of programs and initiatives (e.g., 100 Black Men of America, Alpha Phi Alpha, National Urban League) to reverse this scholastic underachievement epidemic, to stem the rejection of academics by Black males, and to eliminate a perceived outlook of hopelessness and helplessness among this student group. But, little progress seems to have been sustained—the achievement gap remains wide and real for these males (see Barton, 2003). What must be done to more effectively close the achievement gap, to open doors to challenging classes for Black males, and to reverse the negative views that these males have of themselves as scholars?

Having examined the explanations for poor school achievement among Black males and having critiqued those initiatives directed toward remediating their underachievement for more than two decades, I have come to believe that a missing ingredient in closing the achievement gap is the lack of attention devoted to developing a positive image of African American males as scholars (Whiting, 2006). I am asserting that if we are truly attempting to close the achievement gap and to open educational doors that have been consistently closed and/or locked, we must promote and nurture a scholar identity among Black males—as early as possible. Despite years of learning to devalue education, African American adolescents can still be reached (Carson, 1999; Hrabowski, 1998). We can still make a difference in the lives of these Black adolescent males. In this article, I describe characteristics of a scholar identity, and offer recommendations for immediate, meaningful, and long-term change.

### **Sense of Self in School Settings**

In most school settings, the extent to which students view themselves as learners and intellectual beings plays a major role in how well they achieve and the confidence they have in academic settings. Clearly, students who lack confidence in school become unmotivated and unengaged (e.g., Dweck, 1999, 2006; Graham, 1998). As an alternative to saving their ego, or “saving face,” they find their identities in other areas and settings. Stated differently, Black males who have an underdeveloped sense of academic identity are less likely to persist in school, more likely to be identified as “at risk,” less likely to be high achievers, more likely to be in special education, and less likely to be identified as gifted. Frequently, disengaged students are disproportionately Black males (Ford, 1996; Grantham, 2004; Hébert, 2001; Whiting, 2006). For instance, federal data indicate that although Black males

comprise 8.37% of school district enrollments nationally, they comprise 3.54% of students in gifted programs (Elementary and Secondary Schools Civil Rights Survey, 2000). Thus, although educators are justifiably seeking the most effective ways to identify giftedness and potential in all students, this need seems most pressing for Black males. And, it is very pressing among secondary-level students, as described later.

In the section that follows, I describe the characteristics of a scholar identity. First, however, I wish to set forth a few propositions guiding this model: (a) Black males are more likely to achieve academically when they have a scholar identity; (b) Black males are more likely to be viewed by educators and families as gifted or highly capable if they achieve at higher levels; (c) we cannot close the achievement gap or place Black males at promise for achievement unless we focus on their academic identities; and (d) the earlier we focus on the scholar identities of such males, the more likely we are to develop a future generation of Black male scholars who are in a position to break the vicious cycle of underachievement.

In addition to these propositions, two caveats or assumptions should be noted. First, I recognize that most of the components or characteristics (e.g., self-efficacy, need for achievement, willingness to make sacrifices) may be common among successful students, regardless of gender and race. What makes the model specific to African American males are the last two characteristics—racial identity and masculinity. I argue, as have others (e.g., Brod & Kaufman, 1994; hooks, 2004; Platt, 2002; Sailes, 2003), that issues of masculinity differ across race and that, when working with Blacks and other racial/ethnic minorities on identity issues (self-esteem and self-concept), one must consider their identity as a racial and racialized individual (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). Second, the model is not developmental to the extent that it is age bound. Developing a scholar identity should begin as early as possible and our efforts must be ongoing; becoming a scholar is a lifelong process.

### **At Promise: Characteristics of a Scholar Identity**

As already noted, Black males represent a student group that has been frequently overlooked for gifted education referral, screening, and placement. What can educators do to remedy the situation? Why do so many Black males attempt to find their identities on the athletic field and in the entertainment industry? Why do so few find their identities, their self-efficacy, and sources of pride

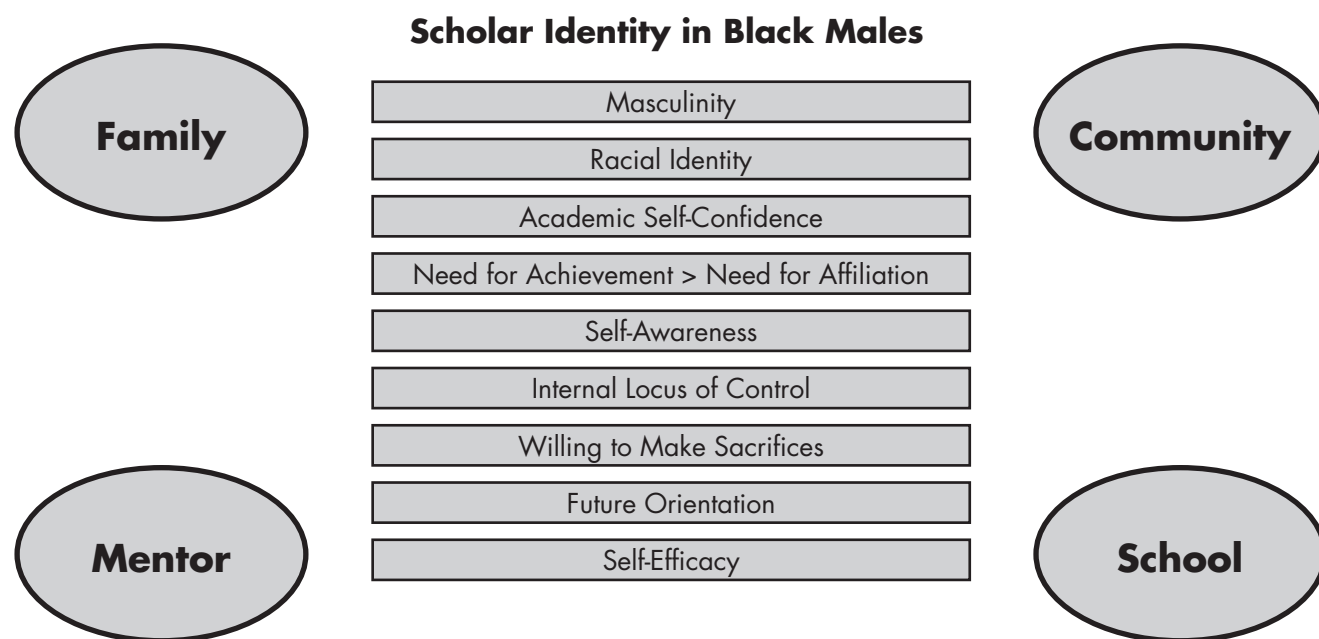


Figure 1. Conceptual model: Scholar identity in Black males

in academic settings? What can educators do to develop and nurture a scholar identity among these particular male students? What is a scholar identity? This article is based on the proposition that both underachievement and the underrepresentation of Black males in gifted education programs is influenced by their identities as students, namely their scholar identities.

Black males who have a positive scholar identity view themselves as academicians, as studious, as competent and capable, and as intelligent or talented in school settings (Whiting, 2006). Having worked with African American males for more than two decades, I have found several characteristics, all grounded in and supported by research, that contribute to this notion of a scholar identity. I begin with a discussion of self-efficacy, which lays the foundation for other characteristics of internal scholar identity. The following characteristics are presented in ascending order.

### Self-Efficacy

Bandura's (1977) seminal theory reports that the role of self-efficacy, including one's self-image as a learner in the context of academic achievement, cannot be ignored or trivialized. Self-efficacy is the belief that "I can do it; I am competent and able." Like other aspects of identity (i.e., self-concept and self-esteem), self-efficacy plays a fundamental role in how a student performs in school settings. In the proposed model, self-efficacy is the center of a scholar identity; it serves as the foundation for the

other characteristics, as illustrated in Figure 1. Black males who have a scholar identity have a positive and heightened sense of self-efficacy. Leading scholars of gifted minorities (Ford, 1996; Hilliard, 2003) found resilience is a noticeable characteristic of high-achieving or gifted Black males. These individuals appear to share a few characteristics: (a) high resilience, (b) high self-confidence, (c) high self-control, (d) a strong sense of self-responsibility, and (e) a clear understanding of the task at hand and the belief that they can accomplish all the subtasks of the intended goal. Further, they believe they are strong students. Many older Black males with developed sense of self-efficacy understand that others may have negative stereotypes about Black males, but they choose to reject these views because they deem themselves to be intelligent and talented. They are not deterred by challenges or setbacks because they are optimistic; they even seek out academic challenges, and thrive when educators hold high expectations for them.

### Willing to Make Sacrifices

Many adults have learned through experiences, as well as trials and tribulations, that sacrifices are part of the success recipe. That is, trials and tribulations are necessary for reaching both short-term and long-term goals. There can be no progress, no achievement without sacrifice, as James Allen (1960) is often cited in *As a Man Thinketh*. Likewise, African American males who have a scholar identity also understand how some sacrifices are necessary in order to reach many worthy goals and objectives. Therefore, they

are more likely to sacrifice some of their social life (e.g., excessive time at play, television or video games, parties, dating, popularity, procrastination, and so forth) in order to reach self-defined and valued goals. They understand the concept “no pain, no gain,” or as Frederick Douglass once said in 1857, “No struggle, no progress . . . We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice” (p. 204).

### Internal Locus of Control

Locus of control (LOC) refers to people’s general beliefs about the causes of their successes and failures, particularly their own responsibility in such outcomes (Rotter, 1966). An internal LOC is the belief that outcomes (e.g., good grades, high test scores, poor test scores) are controlled by or due to one’s ability and/or effort or lack of preparation and study; conversely, an external LOC is the belief that outcomes are controlled by fate and circumstances (e.g., unfair test, difficult teacher, poor explanations, good grades, and so forth).

African American males who have an internal locus of control are optimistic; these males believe they can do well in school because they have a strong work ethic—they participate in class, they study, and they do school assignments with little external prompting. Just as important, when they fail or do poorly in school, males with an internal locus of control are willing to ask for help; they are not ashamed to say “I am confused” or “I don’t understand” or “I just need to study more next time.” Thus, these Black males are less likely to blame low achievement, failure, or mistakes on their teachers, families, and/or peers. Instead, they take responsibility for their choices and actions, while being mindful of outside pressures and societal injustices.

### Future Oriented

Motivation theories and research (e.g., Dweck, 1999, 2006; Graham, 1998; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000) indicate that people who have aspirations stay focused and prepare for both their future and present successes. They think about both the present and the future, particularly regarding how one’s current behaviors and decisions influence future outcomes. Black males with high and realistic aspirations are not overly concerned about immediate gratification and short-term interests and goals. These students set realistic goals—goals that must be achieved with an education; likewise, they recognize and appreciate the importance of high grades, excellent school attendance, and the benefits of taking challenging courses (e.g., AP, IB and honors classes) in order to reach their goals.

### Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is an open, honest appraisal and understanding of one’s strengths and limitations (Cooley, 1902; Silvia & Duval, 2001). Black males who have high self-awareness do not let their weaknesses distract them from putting forth effort in school and on assignments. Quite the contrary—these Black males are able to adapt and find ways to compensate for their weaknesses (e.g., they get a tutor in classes where they are not doing well, they study proactively, they study longer, and they study frequently).

### Need for Achievement

According to McClelland’s (1961) need to achieve theory, many people have an intense need to achieve and succeed. These people desire to do well and consistently try to figure out ways to do their work better. They are more concerned about personal achievement than rewards, and set high but achievable goals for themselves. McClelland believed that these people are very desirable for companies because their drive to succeed and achieve makes them work harder and attempt to think of better ways of accomplishing goals. For Black males who have a scholar identity, the need for achievement is stronger than the need for affiliation, which is consistent with McClelland’s theory. Thus, their identity is not determined by the number of friends they have or their popularity. Rather, they value the quality of friendships over the quantity of friends. Like most adolescents, they want a social life and friends; however, they are not troubled about being popular for the sake of popularity. African American males with a strong need for achievement understand that high academic achievement will take them farther in life than being social or popular. In this sense, school and learning comes first, guiding most of their decisions.

### Academic Self-Confidence

Dweck (1999) has argued that students’ views of themselves in academic settings—their academic self-confidence—play a central role in their school achievement. Students who believe they are intelligent and capable in school are more likely to persist. Black males with academic self-confidence believe they are strong or excellent students. They feel at ease and confident in academic settings; they enjoy learning, they enjoy rigor, and they value playing with ideas. Most importantly, they do not feel inferior or inadequate in academic settings and challenging classes; nor do they feel the need to negate, deny, or minimize their academic abilities and skills. As previously

stated, these males have a strong work ethic. They spend time doing schoolwork, they study, and require little pushing from parents and teachers. Essentially, Black males with a high academic self-confidence understand that effort is just as important, or more important, than the ability to be successful.

## Racial Identity

In May 2005, we lost one of America's pioneers in social research. Psychologist Dr. Kenneth Clark, who is best known for presenting before the Supreme Court in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case, is also known for the theories he and his wife Mamie Phipps Clark developed regarding the harmful effects of segregation on Black children. Their studies (1939a, 1939b, 1939c, 1940, 1947, 1950), in particular, showed that Black children (preschoolers) viewed Black dolls as inferior to White dolls; these findings influenced the justices' decision to end segregation. Their work encapsulated the concept of racial identity and pride, and further demonstrated the potentially negative effects of segregation and educational deprivation on children's psyche.

Much can be drawn from this research when working with Black males. Essentially, one must consider their identities as they relate to race and gender roles. As with self-esteem and self-concept, racial identity affects Black males' achievement and motivation (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). For these males, race has high salience: They are comfortable being as identified as Black; they have racial pride. These Black males seek greater self-understanding as racial beings, but are also aware of the importance of adapting to their environment and being bicultural, namely being confident and at ease in both White and Black settings (Cross & Vandiver). Just as important, they do not equate achievement with "acting White" or "selling out" (Ferguson, 2001; Ford, 1996; Fordham, 1988). That is to say, these teenage males refuse to be restricted by social injustices based on gender, socioeconomic status, and race or ethnicity. They refuse to give in to low expectations and will work diligently to change such expectations.

## Masculinity

Masculinity is an oft misunderstood, sensitive, and controversial topic. In this model, I refer only to the sense that African American males with a scholar identity do not equate being intelligent, studious, or talented with being feminine or "unmanly." Rather than inculcate these ideas, these African American males truly believe that males are intelligent and that being gifted or intelligent

does not detract from one's sense of masculinity or manhood and manliness. If allowed, youth will, through multimedia sources, family, community, and school, develop a destructive meaning of masculinity. Without the guidance of caring and responsible adults, young Black males will be forever challenged to reach their potential.

## At Promise: Suggestions for Educators for Promoting a Scholar Identity

Just as many Black males find their self-efficacy in nonacademic settings (sports, music, and entertainment settings), they are equally capable of finding their identity in school settings. To break the cycle of poor achievement and school apathy, these young men can and must find their identity—their niche and pride—in school settings. Although parents and primary caregivers lay the foundation for our identity, educators cannot neglect this area of development. In other words, teachers also affect how students view themselves as scholars or intellectual beings. The ultimate question is: How do we promote a scholar identity among Black males, too many of whom feel marginalized in school settings, and feel that they are unintelligent and incapable of succeeding in gifted education or rigorous courses? A few suggestions are offered below.

## Mentors and Role Models

Mentors play a central role in the lives of gifted Black students (Grantham, 2004). Mentors and role models have always played a fundamental role in developing gifts and talents and motivating students. Such organizations as fraternities, the Boys and Girls Clubs, 100 Black Men, National Urban League, YMCA, and others recognize that one person can make a difference in a child's life. When working with Black male teenagers, role models and mentors can focus on leadership skills; notions of manhood or masculinity; developing positive relationships; ways to resolve conflicts and manage anger; ways to cope with social injustices; strategies for improving learning strategies and techniques (e.g., study skills, organizational skills, time management skills); career development; social skills; communication skills; soft skills (e.g., etiquette, diplomacy, tact); and networking. Because they are adolescents, these Black males will also need exposure to college settings (including Ivy League colleges and historically Black colleges and universities) and vocational internships with leadership roles.



## Multicultural Counseling (Academic, Social-Emotional, Vocational)

In educational settings, we primarily focus on students' cognitive and academic development. Clearly, as eluded throughout this article, we cannot develop a scholar identity in Black males by focusing exclusively on their academic needs and development. Thus, we must also address their vocational and affective or social/emotional needs and development. Black adolescent males benefit from counseling experiences where they are able to talk about their concerns and needs (Ford, Moore, & Whiting, 2006; Lee, 2006), as well as listen to how Black and other racial/ethnic minority males cope with and overcome personal, cultural, social/emotional, academic, and vocational challenges. Both individual and group counseling can address their needs, interests, and concerns. More specifically, multicultural counseling that is relevant and meaningful to African American males (Ford et al.; Lee) will necessarily focus on their specific culture-specific and gender-specific needs and concerns.

## Academic-Oriented School Events

School functions and events provide an ideal way to reinforce a scholar identity in Black males. The development of career days, the use of frequent and ongoing (e.g., monthly) motivational speakers in classes and schoolwide assemblies, and leadership development workshops represent a few examples of relevant academic-related events. The goal of these experiences—these booster shots—is to keep achievement at the forefront of Black males' minds.

## Multicultural Education

When Black males are in school, what do they learn about themselves? Proponents of multicultural education maintain that racial/ethnic minority students, regardless of gender, will become more motivated and engaged when they see themselves affirmed in the materials and content (Banks, 2006; Ferguson, 2000; Ford & Harris, 1999; Steele, Perry, & Hilliard, 2004). Reading the biographies of Black and other racial/ethnic minority heroes can help inspire African American males, as well as develop their sense of social justice (e.g., Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ella Baker, Malcolm X, Vivien Thomas, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Carter G. Woodson, Henry Louis Gates, Cornel West, and Michael E. Dyson). All of these great people faced barriers to achievement, but were scholars who were resilient. How did they cope? What can Black males learn

from their experiences and stories? Because few successful people went through life without challenges, their stories give Black males a dose of reality and a sense of much needed hope.

## Community Outreach and Service

The previous recommendations focus on what educators can do for and with Black males. However, a scholar identity must also include Black male teenagers taking on responsibilities. The opportunity to contribute to the lives of others is a rewarding experience. Accordingly, Black male teenagers who are gifted can share their gifts and talents with other males. They themselves can serve as leaders—mentors, role models, and tutors—to younger Black and other racial/ethnic minority males. These arrangements include older successful Black males (e.g., class valedictorians and salutatorians, and members and leaders of the National Honor Society) mentoring gifted Black male teenagers and providing them with academically focused experiences. Older males gifted in art, science, math, music, and language arts can tutor younger males and underachieving males in these subject areas. They can volunteer at youth programs, shelters, senior citizen homes, and in other ways “give back” to their community.

## Conclusion

Sadly, Black males are sorely underrepresented in gifted education and overrepresented among those who experience school failure and disengagement. Many efforts have been developed to prevent and reverse these stubborn trends. There are numerous reasons for these atrocious rates of school failure, underachievement, and educational disengagement. I would never place the blame solely on the shoulders of a child. And, a child who is trained to underachieve will, more times than not, do exactly what he or she is taught. In this article, I have proposed another model to consider, specifically that educators must recognize the importance of developing and nurturing a scholar identity in this student population. With a sustained focus on developing a scholarly identity, hopefully, more African American males will find a sense of belonging in school settings, and value education and all that learning has to offer. Teachers will find joy in teaching these males and maybe then we can close the achievement gap. Maybe then we can increase the representation of Black males in gifted education. Maybe then these young men can have the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

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## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The terms *Black* and *African American* are used interchangeably in this article.